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SUBJECT: FRENCH SEEKING TO OPEN STRATEGIC DIALOGUE WITH PAKISTAN

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After five years of cool relations, France hopes to open a "strategic dialogue" with Pakistan based on shared security concerns. Notwithstanding the 2002 terrorist attack in Karachi that killed 11 French nationals, the Pakistan desk officer said the MFA now believes it would only be counterproductive to further ignore a country that stands at the center of international efforts to combat terrorism and nuclear proliferation. To get the ball rolling, the MFA has proposed that the GoF and GoP begin concrete discussions at the expert level on export controls, non-proliferation, counterterrorism and Afghanistan. The GoP has agreed in principle. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Poloff met February 21 with Sonia Barbry, MFA desk officer for Pakistan, to discuss the February 14-15 visit of A/S-equivalent for Asia Michel Filhol to Islamabad. Filhol, who assumed his new position on December 15, chose Pakistan as the destination for his first South Asian trip at the behest of Gerard Araud, the MFA's Political Director, Barbry said. Filhol met with counterparts at the Pakistani MFA, MoD and with the National Security Council, during a visit that Barbry characterized as the first step in a tentative reopening of strategic dialogue with Pakistan. The intention was to lay the groundwork for a more high-profile visit by Araud in late 2007 or early 2008 following the Pakistani presidential elections.

¶3. (C) To underscore that the proposed diplomatic exchanges represented a significant shift in French policy, Barbry offered a brief synopsis of recent French-Pakistani relations. On May 8, 2002, three Pakistani assailants bombed a bus in Karachi owned by French defense contractor DCN, killing 11 French engineers and technicians. DCN had signed a contract in 1994 with the Pakistani Navy to jointly build three Agosta 90B submarines and then transfer the technology. The GoF responded to the terrorist attack with a drastic reduction in its diplomatic presence in Pakistan, suspending development assistance, closing the French high school and Alliance Francaise programs, and evacuating all but one diplomat from the Consulate in Karachi.

¶4. (C) Until revelations of A.Q. Khan's vast proliferation network emerged in early 2004, Barbry conceded that the MFA had neglected Pakistan. What followed was what Barbry called a period of reflection, during which the MFA acknowledged that its "crisis of confidence" with Pakistan should not dissuade it from embracing a "pragmatic" dialogue with a

country where the international struggle against terrorism and proliferation would either flounder or succeed. In December 2005, President Musharraf embarked on a tour of the Middle East to urge fellow Muslim leaders to join forces in finding a diplomatic solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Barbry said his constructive diplomacy "proved to the MFA that Pakistan could be present in international debates." Later that month, then-Political Director Stanislas de Laboulaye went to Islamabad to propose a structured bilateral dialogue on shared political and security concerns. Barbry said the Pakistanis cautiously agreed, but much of 2006 was spent discussing who would be the appropriate interlocutors on each side and what subjects would be most fruitful to discuss.

¶5. (C) Following Filhol's visit, Barbry said the MFA has a more concrete sense of what the next steps should be. The MFA has established three areas in which it wants French and Pakistani technical experts to engage and share information. First, Pakistan must explain its export control regime for weapons and how it tracks final end-use; Barbry said the GoF, in turn, would share its own export controls, and explain what safeguards the Pakistanis must implement before France could justify further arms sales. (NOTE: Pakistan has been pressing France for years to sell it Mirage fighter aircrafts to offset the traditional defense imbalance in the sub-continent, but France has always refused, preferring to favor its relationship with India. In the MFA's view, this lack of defense contracts limits its leverage with Pakistan. END NOTE.) Second, the MFA wants to discuss concrete strategies that could help the GoP disrupt nuclear proliferation networks. Third, the MFA hopes to discuss counterterrorism, particularly how Pakistan can clamp down on

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Al Qaeda and Taliban operating within Pakistan, secure the porous Afghan-Pak border, and address the roots of fundamentalism that begin in the madrassas.

¶6. (C) Ultimately, Barbry concluded, the MFA's goal is to better understand Pakistani thinking, to view security challenges in the sub-continent from its perspective, and ultimately to learn its outlook on questions of international concern. "It's hard for us to imagine, these past 60 years, what it would be like to be faced with enemies on both sides. Pakistan asks to be considered a strategic partner. So, we're saying to them: Explain yourselves." Barbry characterized the Pakistani response so far as tepid but encouraging: Although the GoP has not committed to anything, Filhol's interlocutors told him they agreed that a more structured strategic dialogue was indeed necessary. Barbry had the impression from Filhol that the Pakistanis would be cautious until they felt more personally familiar with their French interlocutors.

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